

The BLACK BOX

by E. Phillips Oppenheim

Novelized from the Photo Play of the Same Name. Produced by the Universal Film Manufacturing Company.

SYNOPSIS.

Sanford Quest, master criminologist of the world, finds that in bringing Justice Macdougall, the murderer of Lord Ashleigh's daughter, he has but just entered a life-and-death struggle with a mysterious master criminal. In a hidden hut in Professor Ashleigh's garden, he has seen an anthropoid ape skeleton and a living inhuman creature, half monkey, half man, destroyed by fire. In his rooms at intervals have appeared from nowhere two black boxes with sarcastic and threatening notes signed with a pair of arms, threatening hands, representing those which have already figured in a diamond robbery. With his secretary, Laura, and his assistant, Lenora, he follows the trail of Macdougall, who escaped on his way to prison, and finds Macdougall's dead body in a cave on a lonely hillside. After a thrilling escape from two thugs who try to kill him he returns to his rooms to find his valet, Ross Brown, and a Miss Quigley murdered, and Police Inspector French investigating. French, puzzled, half suspects Quest of the crime.

FIFTH INSTALLMENT

ON THE RACK.

CHAPTER XII.

For the moment a new element had been introduced into the horror of the little tableau. All eyes were fixed upon Quest, who listened to the Inspector's dubious words with a supercilious smile upon his lips.

"Perhaps," he suggested, "you would like to ask me a few questions?" "Perhaps I may feel it my duty to do so," the inspector replied gravely. "In the first place, then, Mr. Quest, will you kindly explain the condition of your clothes?"

Quest shrugged his shoulders. "Here you are, then," he replied. "This morning I decided to make an attempt to clear up the mystery of Macdougall's disappearance. I sent on my secretary, Miss Laura, to make friends with the section boss, and Lenora and I went out by automobile a little later. We instituted a search on a new principle, and before very long we found Macdougall's body. That's one up against you, I think, inspector."

"Very likely," the inspector observed. "Go on, please."

"I left the two young ladies, at Miss Lenora's wish, to superintend the removal of the body. I myself had an engagement to deliver over her jewels to Mrs. Rheinholdt here at midday. I returned to where my automobile was waiting, started for the city and was attacked by two thugs near the section house. I got away from them, ran to the tower house to try and stop the freight, was followed by the thugs, and jumped out on to the last car from the signal arm."

"Where is your automobile?" "No idea," Quest replied. "I left it in the road. When I ped from the freight car I took a cab to the professor's and called for him, as arranged."

The inspector nodded. "I shall have to ask you to excuse me for a moment," he said, "while I ring up number ten signal tower. If Mr. Quest's story receives corroboration the matter is at an end."

The inspector left the room almost immediately. When he returned he was looking graver than ever.

"Quest," he announced, "your alibi is useless—in fact, a little worse than useless. The operator at number ten has been found murdered at the back of the tower!"

Quest started. "I ought not to have left him to those thugs," he murmured regretfully.

"There is no automobile of yours in the vicinity," the inspector continued, "nor any news of it. I think it will be as well now, Quest, for this matter to take its obvious course. Will you, first of all, hand over her jewels to Mrs. Rheinholdt?"

Quest drew the keys of the safe from his pocket, crossed the room and swung open the safe door. For a moment afterwards he stood transfixed. His arm, half outstretched, remained motionless. Then he turned slowly around.

"The jewels have been stolen," he announced with unnatural calm. The inspector laid his hand heavily upon Quest's shoulder.

"You will kindly consider yourself under arrest, Quest. Ladies and gentlemen, will you clear the room now, if you please. The ambulance I telephoned for is outside."

The professor, who had been looking as though dazed, suddenly intervened.

"Mr. French," he said earnestly, "I am convinced that you are making a great mistake. In arresting and taking away Mr. Quest you are removing from us the one man who is likely to be able to clear up this mystery."

The inspector pushed him gently to one side. "You will excuse me, professor," he said, "but this is no matter for argument. If Mr. Quest can clear himself, no one will be more glad than I."

"Come round and see me in the Tombs, one of you."

The ambulance men came and departed with their grim burden, the room on the ground floor was locked and sealed, and the house was soon empty except for the two girls. Toward three o'clock Lenora went out and returned with a newspaper. She crossed it with noiseless footsteps, slipped into the study and moved stealthily to the fireplace. There was a little heap of ashes in one distinct spot. She gathered them up in her handkerchief and secreted it in her dress and quietly left the house.

At Georgia square she found Laura waiting for her, and a few minutes afterward the two girls were examining the ashes with the aid of Quest's microscope. Among the little pile was one fragment at the sight of which they both exclaimed. It was distinctly a shred of charred muslin embroidery. Lenora pointed toward it triumphantly.

"Isn't that evidence?" she demanded. "Let's ring up Inspector French!" Laura shook her head doubtfully.

"Not so fast," she advised. "French is a good sort in his way, but he's prejudiced just now against the boss. I'm not sure that this evidence would go far by itself."

"It's evidence enough for us to go to Craig, though! What we have got to do is to get a confession out of him, somehow!"

Laura studied her companion, for a moment, curiously. "Taking some interest in Mr. Quest, kid, ain't you?"

Lenora looked up. Then her head suddenly sank into her hands. She knew quite well that her secret had escaped her. Laura patted her shoulder.

"That's all right, child," she said soothingly. "We'll see him through this, somehow or other."

"Laura," exclaimed Lenora, "we will save Mr. Quest and we will get hold of Craig! I have a plan. Listen!"

CHAPTER XIII.

Craig's surprise was real enough as he opened the back door of the professor's house on the following morning and found Lenora standing on the threshold.

Lenora smiled pleasantly. "I came to this door," she said, "because I wanted a little talk with you."

Craig's attitude was perfect. He was mystified but he remained respectful. "Will you come inside?" he invited. She shook her head.

"I am afraid," she confided, "of what I am going to say being overheard. Come with me down to the garage for a moment."

He opened the doors of the garage, leaving the keys in the lock, and they both passed inside.

"You can say what you please here without the slightest fear of being overheard, miss," Craig remarked.

Lenora nodded, and breathed a prayer to herself. She was nearer the door than Craig by about half a dozen paces. Her hand groped in the little bag she was carrying and gripped something hard. She clenched her teeth for a moment. Then the automatic pistol flashed out through the gloom.

"Craig," she threatened, "if you move I shall shoot you."

It seemed as though the man were a coward. He began to tremble, his lips twitched, his eyes grew larger and rounder.

"What is it?" he faltered. "What do you want?"

"Just this," Lenora said firmly. "I suspect you to be guilty of the crime for which Sanford Quest is in prison. I am going to have you questioned. If you are innocent you have nothing to fear. If you are guilty there will be someone here before long who will extract the truth from you."

The man's face was an epitome of terror. Even his knees shook. Lenora felt herself grow calmer with every moment.

"I am going outside to send a message," she told him. "I shall return presently."

"Don't go," he begged suddenly. "Don't leave me! I am innocent. I have done nothing wrong. If you keep me here, you will do more harm than you can dream of."

"It is for other people to decide about your innocence," Lenora said calmly. "I have nothing to do with that. If you are wise you will stop here quietly."

"Have you said anything to Mr. Ashleigh, miss?" the man asked piteously.

"Not a word."

An expression of relief shone for a moment upon his face. Lenora pointed to a stool.

"Sit down there and wait quietly," she ordered.

"I will send for my coat and we will go together, if you like," he suggested. She smiled.

"I am going the other way, back to Georgia square," she explained. "No, please don't ring. I can find my own way out."

She hurried from the room. Outside in the hall she paused for a moment, listening with beating heart. By the side wall was a hat rack with branching pegs, from which several coats were hanging. She slipped quietly behind their shelter.

A moment or two later she heard the professor leave the house. Very cautiously she stole out from her hiding place. The hall was empty. She crossed it with noiseless footsteps, slipped into the study and moved stealthily to the fireplace. There was a little heap of ashes in one distinct spot. She gathered them up in her handkerchief and secreted it in her dress and quietly left the house.

"Look here," she said, "Lenora's crazy with the idea that Craig has done these jobs—Craig, the professor's servant, you know. We used the phototelesma yesterday afternoon and saw him burn something in the professor's study. Lenora went up straight away and got hold of the ashes."

"Smart girl," Quest murmured, nodding approvingly. "Well!"

"There are distinct fragments," Laura continued, "of embroidered stuff such as the Salvation Army girl might have been wearing. We put them on one side, but they ain't enough evidence. Lenora's idea is that you should get hold of Craig and hypnotize him into a confession."

"That's all right," Quest replied, "but how am I to get hold of him?"

Laura glanced once more carelessly around to where the guard stood. "Lenora's gone up to the professor's again this afternoon. She is going to try and get hold of Craig and lock him in the garage. If she succeeds, she will send a message by wireless at three o'clock. It is half-past two now."

"Well?" Quest exclaimed. "Well?"

"You can work this guard, if you want to," Lenora went on. "I have seen you tackle worse cases. He seems dead easy. Then let me in the cell, take my clothes and leave me here."

Quest followed the scheme in his mind quickly. "It is all right," he decided, "but I am not at all sure that they can really hold me on the evidence they have got. If they can't, I shall be doing myself more harm than good in this way."

"It's no use unless you can get hold of Craig quickly," Laura said. "He is setting the scares, as it is."

"I'll do it," Quest decided. "Call the guard, Laura."

She obeyed. The man came good-naturedly toward them.

Quest looked at him steadfastly through the bars. "I want you to come inside for a moment," Quest repeated softly. "Unlock the door, please, take the key off your bunch and come inside."

The man hesitated, but all the time his fingers were fumbling with the keys. Quest's lips continued to move. The warden opened the door and entered. A few minutes later Quest passed the key through the window to Laura, who was standing on guard.

Without a word, and with marvelous rapidity, the change was effected. Laura produced from her handbag a wig, which she pinned inside her hat and passed over to Quest. Then she flung herself on to the bed and drew the blanket up to her chin.

"How long will he stay like that?" she whispered, pointing to the warden, who was sitting on the floor with his arms folded and his eyes closed.

"Half an hour or so," Quest answered. "Don't bother about him. I shall drop the key back through the window."

Quest reached Georgia square at five minutes to three. A glance up and down assured him that the house was unwatched. He let himself in with his own key, threw Laura's clothes off, and, after a few moments' hesitation, selected from the wardrobe a rough tweed suit with a thick lining and lapels. Just as he was trying his tie, the little wireless which he had laid on the table at his side began to record a message. He glanced at the clock. It was exactly three.

Quest's eyes shone for a moment with satisfaction. Then he sent off his answering message, put on a dust-ter and slouch hat, and left the house by the side entrance. In a few moments he was in Broadway, and a quarter of an hour later a taxicab deposited him at the entrance to the

professor's house. He walked swiftly up the drive and turned toward the garage, hoping every moment to see something of Lenora. The door of the place stood open. He entered and walked around. It was empty. There was no sign of either Craig or Lenora!

Quest recovered from his first disappointment, stole carefully out and made a minute examination of the place. Close to the corner from which Lenora had sent her wireless message to him, he stooped and picked up a handkerchief, which from the marking he recognized at once. A few feet away the gravel was disturbed as though by the trampling of several feet. He set his teeth.

"I've got to find that girl," he muttered. "Craig can go to h—!"

He turned away and approached the house. The front door stood open and he made his way at once to the library. The professor, who was sitting at his desk surrounded by a pile of books and papers, addressed him, as he entered, without looking up.

"Where on earth have you been, Craig?" he inquired petulantly. "I have rung for you six times. Have I not told you never to leave the place without orders?"

"It is not Craig," Quest replied quietly. "It is I, professor—Sanford Quest."

The professor swung round in his chair and eyed his visitor in blank astonishment.

"Quest?" he exclaimed. "God bless my soul! Have they let you out already, then?"

"I came out," Quest replied grimly. "Sit tight, and listen to me for a moment, will you?"

"You came out?" the professor repeated, looking a little dazed. "You mean you escaped?"

Quest nodded. "Perhaps I made a mistake," he admitted, "but here I am. Now listen, professor." And he told the story of the last few hours.

The professor's face was almost pitiful in its blank amazement. His mouth was wide open like a child's, words seemed absolutely denied to him. He rose to his feet, obviously a tremendous effort to adjust his ideas.

"Craig locked up in my garage?" he murmured. "Craig guilty of those murders? Why, my dear Mr. Quest, a more harmless, a more inoffensive, peace-loving and devoted servant than John Craig never trod this earth!"

"Maybe," Quest replied, "but where is he?"

The professor could do nothing but look around him a little vaguely.

"I am going back," Quest announced. "My only chance is the wireless. If Lenora is alive or at liberty, she will communicate with me."

"May I come, too?" the professor asked timidly.

"Come by all means," Quest assented. "I will drive you down in your car, if you like."

The professor hurried away to get his coat and hat, and a few minutes later they started off. In Broadway they left the car at a garage and made their way up a back street which enabled them to enter the house at the side entrance. They passed upstairs into the sitting-room. Quest fetched the pocket wireless and laid it down on the table. The professor examined it with interest.

"You are marvelous, my friend," he declared. "With all these resources of science at your command it seems incredible that you should be in the position you are."

Quest nodded coolly. "Just one moment, professor, while I send off a message, he said, opening the little instrument. "Where are you, Lenora?" he signaled. "Send me word and I will fetch you. I am in my own house for the present. Let me know that you are safe."

The professor leaned back, smoking one of Quest's excellent cigars. He was beginning to show signs of the liveliest interest.

"Quest," he said, "I wish I could induce you to dismiss this extraordinary supposition of yours concerning my servant Craig. The man has been with me for the best part of twenty years. He saved my life in South America; we have traveled in all parts of the world. He has proved himself to be exemplary, a faithful and devoted servant."

"Then perhaps you will tell me," Quest suggested, "where he is now, and why he has gone away? That does not look like complete innocence, does it?"

The professor sighed. "I cannot stay here much longer, unless I mean to go back to the Tombs," Quest declared.

"Surely," the professor suggested, "your innocence will very soon be established!"

"There is one thing which will happen, without a doubt," Quest replied. "My auto and the chauffeur will be discovered. I have insisted upon inquiries being sent out throughout the state of Connecticut. They tell me, too, that the police are hard on the scent of Red Gallagher and the other man. Unless they get wind of this and sell me purposely, their arrest will be the end of my troubles. To tell you the truth, professor," Quest concluded, "it is not of myself I am thinking at all just now. It is Lenora."

The professor nodded sympathetically. "The young lady who shut Craig up in the garage, you mean? A plucky young woman she must be."

"She has a great many other good qualities besides courage," Quest declared. "Women have not counted for much with me, professor, up till now, any more than they have done, I should think, with you, but I tell you frankly, if anyone has hurt a hair of that girl's head I will have their lives,

whatever the penalty may be! It is for her sake—to find her—that I broke out of prison and that I am trying to keep free. The wisest thing to do, from my own point of view, would be to give myself up. I can't bring myself to do that without knowing what has become of her."

The professor nodded again. "A charming and well-bred young woman she seems," he admitted. "I fear that I should only be a bungler in your profession, Mr. Quest, but if there is anything I can do depend upon me. Personally, I am convinced that Craig will return to me with some plausible explanation as to what has happened."

Quest, for the third or fourth time moved cautiously toward the window. His expression suddenly changed. He glanced suddenly downward, frowned slightly.

"They're after me!" he exclaimed. "Sit still, professor."

He darted into his room and reappeared again almost immediately. The professor gave a gasp of astonishment at his altered appearance. His tweed suit seemed to have been turned inside out. There were no lapels now, and it was buttoned up to his neck. He wore a long white apron, a peaked cap and a chip-piece of astonishing naturalness had transformed him into the semblance of a Dutch grocer's boy.

"I'm off, professor," Quest whispered. "You shall hear from me soon. I have not been here, remember!"

He ran lightly down the steps and into the kitchen, picked up a basket, filled it haphazard with vegetables and threw a cloth over the top. Then he made his way to the front door, peered out for a moment, swung through it on to the step, and, turning round, commenced to labor it with his flat. Two plain-clothes men stood at the end of the street. A police automobile drew up outside the gate. Inspector French, attended by a policeman, stepped out. The former looked searchingly at Quest.

"Well, my boy, what are you doing here?" he asked.

"I cannot answer yet," Quest replied, in broken English. "Ten minutes already have I wasted. I have knocked at all the doors."

French smiled. "You run along home," he said, "and tell your master that he had better leave off delivering goods here for the present."

Quest went off, grumbling. French opened the door with a master key and secured it carefully, leaving one of his men to guard it. He searched the rooms on the ground floor and finally ascended to Quest's study. The professor was still enjoying his cigar.

"Say, where's Quest?" the inspector asked promptly.

"Have you let him out already?" the professor replied, in a tone of mild surprise. "I thought he was in the Tombs prison."

The inspector pressed on without answering. Every room in the house was ransacked. Presently he came back to the room where the professor



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